

## **Section B-9 Elder Care**

The contents of this Toolkit have been developed to assist you in your efforts to support family readiness. Every effort has been made to ensure that the information provided is current and accurate. However, because statutory and regulatory changes may have occurred since the publication of this Toolkit, the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs cannot assume responsibility for its continued accuracy. Before taking any significant action based on the contents of this Toolkit, you should contact your Family Readiness Program representative or legal officer, as appropriate, to secure the most current information.

## Elder Care

Elder care is not a new phenomenon, but it is an issue receiving more attention as the “Baby Boomer” generation is aging. Most of us will become the caregivers of our elderly parents and in-laws. If you are providing regular assistance to a friend or family member, you are a caregiver. You may be a spouse, son, daughter, close friend or distant relative. You may be younger or older yourself. Regardless of your relationship or age, as a caregiver you are making concessions and decisions, and it is a personal sacrifice to provide care for another person. Caregiving can evolve slowly, over a long period of time, or suddenly in the case of illness or an accident. Caregiving can mean having the older person live with you, near you or many miles away. Caregiving can create stress.

As a Guard or Reserve member, caregiving and elder care takes on a different light. Leaving home for training and deployments can create guilt and increases the importance of being prepared. Learn about available resources, have a back-up plan, and most importantly talk openly with your family about their needs. The more prepared and organized you are prior to leaving home, the better off your family will be while you are separated. Get a full assessment of the situation. Knowing all of the facts can help you make an informed and more comfortable decision.

As parents grow older, adult children/caregivers face changes they may not know how to address. You may have concerns about your parents' safety and well being and wonder how you can respect your parents' choices about independence and safety. It is extremely important to obtain a full assessment of your family member's mental, physical, environmental, social, and financial condition. Listed below are some recommendations for comprehensive assessments when planning ahead for your caregiver role:

- **A full assessment** – helps establish his or her ability to remain safely independent. It identifies risks, and options to reduce risks.
- **A successful assessment will result in a comprehensive plan for meeting needs and addressing problems.** The findings may help you conclude that change is needed for your parents' safety and well-being, such as making new housing arrangements or getting in-home assistance. Or an assessment could lead to solving problems and helping a parent remain independent longer. A good plan can result in fewer accidents, less illness, a longer life, better quality of life, and greater independence. It is essential that your parents participate fully in the discussion and decision-making about options.
- **It is possible for you to do an assessment on your own, but professional services are available.** They offer experience in working through problems. Some hospitals and clinics offer geriatric assessment centers or evaluation units in which a medical/social work team looks at all aspects of an older person's health and life. They can counsel you and your parent about assessment results and offer practical assistance, such as linking you with local services and housing options. You can also work with a geriatric care

manager who may provide similar services from an area agency on aging for free or privately for a fee.

- **Professional assessments can take from three hours to several days to complete.**

Even filling out a form with your parents can take considerable time. What factors should you assess? Although there may be slight variations, a thorough assessment should include the topics listed below:

- **Physical Health**

- Have your parents been diagnosed with any chronic diseases – for example, diabetes, high blood pressure, arthritis, or emphysema?
- Consider making doctors appointment for a thorough examination. Sometimes, there are medical conditions that might explain why more help is needed. Frequently, an older person cannot express his or her concerns to the family, but will confide in the doctor.
- If a disease or illness is identified, ask the doctor for information about the disease or illness, and suggestions of books or Web sites that can help you become more familiar with your older relative's condition.
- Have they experienced fractures or trauma, unusual weight gain or loss, incontinence, balance problems?
- Do they have dental problems?
- Is there a list of the health professionals they are currently seeing?

- **Behaviors**

- Have your parents been diagnosed with any psychiatric disorders, such as depression, anxiety disorder, or psychosis?
- Has either been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease or other dementia? Are they alert? Do they have mood swings?
- Are there signs of extreme forgetfulness, wandering off, confusion, disorientation, sadness, or loneliness?
- Have you noticed a decreased interest in reading, writing, communicating, and maintaining friends, or less interest in life in general?

▪ **Medications**

- Check all the medicines your parents take. Note times per day and doses.
- Are they able to take medications as directed, and do they know how to avoid interactions?
- Do they have problems using medicine properly?

▪ **Daily Living Activities**

- How is your parents' mobility? Is there a need for adaptive aids, such as a cane, walker, or grab bars in the bathroom?
- Do they have special dietary needs?
- Are they able to dress, bathe, get up from a chair easily, use a toilet, use the phone, climb stairs, get help in an emergency, shop, prepare meals, do housework, drive safely?

▪ **Environmental Safety**

- How is the neighborhood?
- Is their home safe (e.g., hazards such as throw rugs; adaptive aids; smoke alarms)?
- Are they able to avoid telephone scams and door-to-door fraud?
- Can they maintain their house and yard?

▪ **Support System**

- Do they have the names, addresses, and phone numbers of key family members, friends, and neighbors readily available?
- Do your parents have frequent visitors or do they see friends regularly?
- Do your parents go to a senior center? Do they go out of the house for social reasons?
- Do they belong to organizations, including faith-based groups?
- Do family members live nearby? Do they see these relatives regularly?

▪ **Appearance and Hygiene**

- How is their overall appearance/personal hygiene? Do they routinely brush teeth, trim nails, shave, wash and comb hair?
- Are their clothes clean, and are they dressed appropriately?

- **Finances**

- What insurance coverage is in place?
- Do you have a general idea as to your parents' personal assets?
- Are there any legal documents such as trusts, living wills, durable or other powers of attorney? Do both of them, and you, know where important records are kept?
- Do your parents have a financial plan?
- Are there outside sources of financial assistance for them?

Nearly 22 million American workers are also caregivers for their parents or older relatives and friends. Work is a financial necessity, yet the responsibilities of caregiving and doing well on the job often conflict. The following ideas present an overview of the issues for employees and employers and offer ideas and resources that can help you manage your responsibilities efficiently and balance both your roles more effectively:

**Coping with Dual Roles and Demands**

- Keep the communication lines open! Talk with your family member.
- Offer to work a less desirable shift or be willing to make up time taken for caregiving by working days or shifts when most people want to be off. This flexibility on your part shows your employer that you are committed to the company and your job.
- Consider job sharing or working part time if possible.
- Avoid mixing work with caregiving. If you need to make phone calls or search the Internet for information related to your parent's needs, do it on a lunch break.
- Manage your time well. When you must take time off for caregiving, set priorities and accomplish the most important things first. Delegate responsibilities when you can. Pace yourself; don't do so much in one area that you can't be effective in another.
- Get all the support you can from family members, friends and community resources.
- Take care of your own needs. Pay attention to your health; get enough sleep and exercise regularly. Fun is also important. Take a break before the pressure gets too great. Talk with someone about your feelings and needs. This could be a professional counselor, a member of the clergy, or an employee assistance counselor.
- Talk with your work supervisor about your caregiving issues. It's better to know the reasons for your late arrivals or seeming preoccupation rather than to allow your supervisor to draw his or her own conclusions.

- Take your time and don't panic. You'll end up spending more time and getting fewer results if you start your search for answers without a plan.
- If your family member lives alone, take a good look around the house. Are there unpaid bills piling up? Is the house less clean than it used to be? Is there adequate food in the kitchen? Do you know if your family member has ever forgotten to turn off the stove after cooking? These could be indicators that all is not well, and some help is needed.

### **Taking Care of Yourself, the Caregiver**

As a service member, you have competing responsibilities for work (both military and civilian), children, and your spouse. You probably have important goals and plans that are postponed or interrupted because of your caregiving responsibilities. Whether you are providing direct care or coordinating with others to provide direct care, you are still the caregiver. You may feel that there are too many expectations and not enough time to meet all of them. When challenges are long term or all encompassing, they drain our physical energy, time, money, and health. It is vitally important for you to recognize and learn to cope with the stress you feel from your caregiver role. Sometimes letting go of unrealistic expectations or adjusting your standards will make a big difference. Listed below are five basic strategies to help control and reduce stress:

- Set realistic goals and expectations
  - Plan achievable goals
  - Develop realistic expectations
- Establish your limits
- Ask for and accept help
- Take care of yourself
  - Express your feelings
  - Maintain your health
  - Take time for yourself
- Involve other people
  - Hold a family conference
  - Seek professional assistance
  - Use your community resources

Caregiving decisions should be based on the needs and desires of the person being cared for, and you should also consider the consequences of caregiving decisions for yourself and other family members. Most importantly, as a Guard or Reserve member, be prepared. Establish a caregiving plan, and discuss your plan with your family.